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Charlotte Williams (Ed.). **Social Work and the City. Urban
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BOOKS

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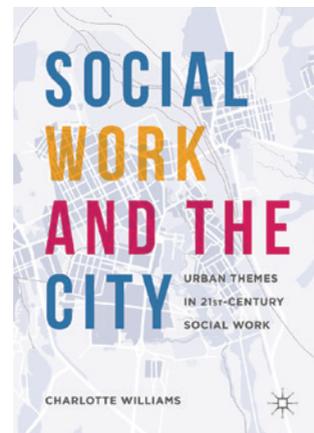
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Increased global urbanization has placed greater emphasis on the need for social work scholars and practitioners to focus on urban settings. Due to their density and scale, cities have higher concentrations of social problems such as unemployment or deprived housing conditions. Many cities are characterized by a social (spatial) dualization between working and unemployed, advantaged and disadvantaged, socially connected and socially isolated, and so on. For social workers, who define their position in terms of human rights and social justice, the precarious access of certain (groups of) urban residents to their basic rights is a particular challenge. At the same time, cities are also hubs of innovation and creative platforms for forging change and new forms of urban



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solidarity. As such, they present opportunities to engage with and mobilise resources for change and to form creative spaces for social work practice and for the co-production of social work knowledge. Overall, we can state that the contemporary transformation of cities presents new challenges and opportunities for the social work profession in terms of its methodologies, skills and identity.

Both the challenges and opportunities of twenty-first century cities and their relation to social work, are discussed in Charlotte Williams' *Social work and the city*. The book attempts to answer the question: "What are the specificities of the city for social work consideration and in what ways is the profession responding to this urban dynamic?" (p. 6). Despite the long and intertwined histories of social work and the city, the intersection between both has hardly been addressed in social work literature. Williams' book is one of the few publications that explicitly brings together urban studies and social work. This is an important merit of the publication.

The book is conceived in two parts. The first part, *Making sense of the city*, consists of four chapters, all written by Williams herself. In the first chapter, Williams argues why an urban focus is of relevance to social work. Moreover, she explores different ways of thinking about the city and discusses their relevance for the profession of social work. Chapter two provides an account of the converging histories of social work and cities and deals with the question "What is urban social work?". Williams describes four competing but overlapping constructions of the city, that each lead to different emphases for urban social work. In the last part of the chapter, she re-theorises the relationship between social work and the city via a number of key areas of focus: place and space, scale, sustainability and new civic governance.

After these more theoretical chapters, the third chapter presents the results of a small study on Melbourne-based social workers' views on the nature of urban social work, city change and its impacts, and the constraints, possibilities and potentials there are for social work efforts in this arena. Finally, in chapter four, Williams focuses on urban research traditions and argues that a distinctive social work research approach on the city has barely been pursued, as social work research has focused more on specialisms and client categories than on the particularities of space. At the same time, she convincingly claims that place matters and that social work needs to find its place in the field of urban studies. Doing so requires, however, defining a focus and parameter for social work research in the city. Williams argues that the specificity of social work research should lie in the fact that it builds further on the social work profession's ambition to promote social justice.

The second part of the book, *Social issues and the city: New directions in practice*, consists of seven invited contributions that each illustrate a specific social issue of significance in modern city life. Chapter 5 focuses on the transition towards superdiversity and on the increase of flexible migration strategies. Chapter 6 brings up the question of aging in urban environments, whereas chapter 7 discusses the experiences of disabled people living in urban social spaces. Chapter 8 demonstrates how care and social work in the city are reconfigured under neo-liberal politics and examines the role of cities as sites of innovation and struggle. As care work in the city does not operate in a vacuum, the impact of the neo-liberal restructuring of welfare is a recurring topic in several chapters. Urban conditions that constitute urban homelessness and social work's response to homelessness form the focus of chapter 9. Based on the case of Melbourne, chapter 10 urges social workers to consider how urban spaces shape disadvantage. The last contribution (chapter 11) explores the advantages of interdisciplinary learning between students of social work and the built environment through the description of such a project in Sydney. In the general conclusion of the book, Williams wraps up the implications of the modern city for social work policy, practice, education and research.

We both are lecturers and researchers with a specific focus on urban social work. Therefore, we were eager to read Williams' book, as, as we mentioned before, only few publications take both the city and social work into account. However, the book has only partly met our expectations. Williams' call for "localised" and adaptable social work and "multi-scalar analysis" at the intersections of the intimate and the global, of the lived and the built environment is highly commendable. Williams convincingly argues that social work is a spatial practice, as the built environment has a very specific effect on people. This argument is often repeated throughout the book, in relation to very different topics and contexts, which enforces its strength. Moreover, Williams' overview of the field of urban studies, her conceptualisation of cities as highly differentiated, socially constructed, fluid, transterritorial and relational and her suggestion to situate urban social work within four partial and overlapping frames – city as machine, city as system, city as community, city as environment – are constructive vantage points for urban social work.

However, it is surprising how Williams, in "making sense of the city", does not engage with post-colonial urban studies and bypasses the large body of knowledge on cities on and from the so-called "Global South", which could provide many useful insights for urban social workers. This perspective might, for example, contradict the statement that "cities are rapidly aging" (p. 20). This is not the case for many booming metropolises in the global South and definitely not so for the capital city of Europe, Brussels, from where we write this. Besides this, Lefèbvre's "right to the

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city", which is a collective right to claim power over the ways in which cities are made and remade, also implies a right to *write* the city, a right to (re)construct the urban through stories originating from non-Western, non-white, non-academic experiences and epistemologies. Such stories are absent in this book. We wonder why a publication on contemporary social work in superdiverse cities does not include at least one contribution from a non-Western context, for example. Including more diverse urban perspectives relates to the call for the "co-production of knowledge and for the validation of different forms of knowledge useful to social work" that the author makes herself in the chapter on social work research (p. 116).

Another point of critique is the limited attention for translocal issues throughout the book. Even though Williams refers to "the trans-locality and transnational nature of virtual networks and virtual community exchange that defy place-based considerations" in the first chapter of the book (p. 22), this point is hardly taken up throughout the rest of the publication. Moreover, translocality is by no means limited to the virtual world. In cities, numerous border-crossing processes take place and translocal and mobile lives are lived, albeit often only temporarily. This brings up the question to what extent place-based considerations are able to deal with these border-crossing aspects of city life. Although Williams writes that "issues of migration, environmental disaster, global poverty and sustainability have demanded attention on an international level with less attention given to the socio-spatial contexts in which they are experienced, realised and negotiated" (p. 44), she does not extensively discuss the relationship between trans-locality and an urban-based lens. As border-crossing lifestyles go hand in hand with border-crossing social problems and practices, a profound discussion of this question would have been of great relevance to the book.

The chapter that most explicitly deals with border-crossing issues is that on superdiversity, written by Dirk Geldof. Geldof presents superdiversity as a pressing urban reality, an organisational challenge, a challenge for urban policy and at the same time a theoretical frame to understand and analyse transitions and increased differentiation. Here, we ask whether superdiversity's "processes of differentiation" can be studied without considering structural inequalities and patterns of power and oppression, emphasised in intersectional analyses, among others.

A key message throughout the book is the need for collaborative, interdisciplinary, place-based social work. The chapters on research (chapter 4) and on education (chapter 11) highlight the necessity of such collaboration. As for research, Williams points to the numerous possibilities in which social work can contribute to an urban research agenda. She and some other authors strongly argue in favour of ethnographic methods and innovative techniques to capture the fluid

characteristics of the city and city life. In this context, we believe that it is not enough to borrow “across critical geography and urbanology” (p. 117). We are convinced that social work research can benefit from highly diverse collaborations, also incorporating frameworks and methods of urban anthropology and (urban) arts, for example. Besides this, we would have loved to read more on the possibilities of digital methods and collaborations for urban social work research. Digital technologies have tremendous impact on urban identities, the meaning of urban space and place and on the ways in which global networks of support and care become territorialized and vice-versa.

A similar remark can be made about chapter 11 on *Educating for Urban Social Work*. Here, Susie Costello and Julian Raxworthy present a case study of an educational project in which social work students and landscape architect students worked together on a housing project in Waterloo, Sydney. We are convinced that it would be even more interesting to expand the collaboration of such interdisciplinary projects to include other city makers such as cultural institutions, artists, activists, civilian collectives and many more. Such an expansion would also enable a necessary diversification of teaching methods, learning environments, et cetera. What's more, we believe that much more could be said about “educating for urban social work” than the described case study. We would have been interested in reading in what other ways we – as lecturers – could deal with urban social work in our educational program.

Even though the key issues dealt with in the invited contributions could by no means be exhaustive, they discuss pertinent topics to contemporary urban social work. Overall, the contributions illustrate that – and how – cities matter to people, as they place and shape what people can do and how they relate. This in itself is an important message for the social work discipline, that, as Williams argues, has neglected to reconsider and re-theorise its relationship to the city.

In order to reconnect with the city, social work has to infuse itself with aspects of other, often distinctly urban disciplines such as anthropology, planning, architecture, arts, health sciences, et cetera. In rapidly changing and highly volatile environments, urban social work has to be versatile and hybrid. Its specific identity, then, might be one of reaffirming an indisputable commitment to social justice and basic (human) rights and a consequent positioning vis-à-vis the (neoliberal) state, its institutions and the private sector. This reflection is reaffirmed on many occasions throughout the book and lines up with the emphasis on urban social work as a subversive practice and as resistance in chapter 8 on *Care, Austerity and Resistance* and in chapter 9 on *Homelessness in Western Cities*.